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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 PRISTINA 000349

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DEPT FOR DRL, INL, AND EUR/SCE, NSC FOR BRAUN, USUN FOR DREW SCHUFLETOWSKI, USOSCE FOR STEVE STEGER

E.O. 12958: DECL: 05/03/2017

TAGS: PGOV KJUS KCRM EAID KDEM UNMIK VI

SUBJECT: KOSOVO: 3,000 RALLY IN PRISTINA FOR FORMER PM AND ICTY INDICTEE RAMUSH HARADINAJ

Classified By: COM TINA KAIDANOW FOR REASONS 1.4 (B) AND (D).

¶1. (C) SUMMARY: An estimated 3,000 people rallied peacefully in Pristina during lunch hour on May 2 in support of ICTY indictee and former Prime Minister Ramush Haradinaj. Some high-level officials of Haradinaj's Alliance for the Future of Kosovo (AAK) party participated, as well as prominent members of other parties, though key government members including the Prime Minister stayed away at USOP urging. The rallies - this was the 15th since Haradinaj left Kosovo for trial in The Hague - are part of a calculated party effort to survive the absence of its leader. The Pristina rally, however, was larger in scale and visibility than the previous, and we have warned party officials that such displays bring unwanted attention to the public's support for an indicted war criminal. END SUMMARY.

¶2. (SBU) Late on April 30, USOP received word that a rally would be organized May 2 in support of Alliance for the Future of Kosovo (AAK) party leader and former Prime Minister Ramush Haradinaj, currently on trial in The Hague for alleged war crimes committed during the 1998-1999 conflict. The event was sponsored by the AAK Youth Forum, which has in recent months organized a number of similar marches and rallies, though generally in western Kosovo and without undue fanfare. Recognizing that such an event in the heart of Pristina would portray a negative image of Kosovo just days after a successful UN Security Council visit, USOP called major AAK officials, including the Prime Minister, to ask that the rally be called off. All professed to be incapable of reversing the logistical preparations that had already been undertaken, but the Prime Minister promised to press his cabinet members to avoid attending the rally.

¶3. (C) Approximately 3000 participants showed up on the day, including -- despite USOP intervention and the Prime Minister's action -- several prominent Kosovo government figures, mainly from the AAK ranks: former Prime Minister Bajram Kosumi (AAK); Energy Minister Ethem Ceku (AAK); Trade and Industry minister Bujar Dugolli (AAK); Kosovo Assembly Presidency member Naim Maloku (AAK); AAK caucus leader Gjylnaze Syla; Assembly Presidency member Hajredin Kuci (PDK); E.O.-listees Rrustem Mustafa and MP Emrush Xhemajli

(PLK); MP Gjergj Dedaj (PLK); Pristina mayor Ismet Beqiri (LDK); Gjakove mayor Aqif Shehu (LDK); AAK Youth Wing leader Kujtim Kerveshi, and the president of the Council for Defense of Human Rights and Freedoms Pajazit Nushi. According to press accounts, Kovoso Liberation Army (KLA) war veterans associations, the University of Pristina Student Union, and even some football organizations also took part in the rally, which was held on the seventh anniversary of the AAK's founding. Supporters chanted Haradinaj's name, waved Albanian flags, and held aloft Haradinaj's picture as well as banners reading "Freedom for Liberators" and "We Believe in Justice." Following a march to the National Theater, organizers symbolically set doves free from cages (note: in fact, it was pigeons from shoe boxes), declaring that Haradinaj deserved the same freedom.

¶4. (C) COMMENT: The rallies, and the now-ubiquitous billboards across Kosovo reminding people to be "with Ramush," are part of a calculated campaign to ensure that Haradinaj retains a place in the popular memory, such that if and when he returns -- as he and his supporters believe he will -- he can return without break to his former status as a high-level political arbiter in Kosovo. The campaign, and the effort to deify Ramush, may also be the glue that is keeping the AAK together; without Haradinaj as the central unifying figure, there is not much left to the party or its cohesiveness. There is thus ample AAK resistance to ending these rallies, despite the negative image conveyed in supporting an indicted war criminal and criticizing The Hague's conduct of the trial. We have made clear to AAK officials at the highest level, and to the PM himself, that this kind of event brings only damage to Kosovo's cause in the Security Council, and will continue to remind them at every opportunity. END COMMENT.

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¶5. (SBU) U.S. Office Pristina clears this cable in its entirety for release to U.N. Special Envoy Martti Ahtisaari.
KAIDANOW